

ROOT OF CONFLICT

Root of Conflict Podcast

Episode: COVID-19 and Peacebuilding in Nigeria

featuring

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interviewed by

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Full Transcript

Root of Conflict Introducers: You're listening to Root of Conflict, a podcast about violent conflict around the world and the people, societies and policy issues it affects. You'll hear from experts and practitioners can conduct research, implement programs and use data analysis to address some of the most pressing challenges facing our world. Root of Conflict is produced by UC3P, in collaboration with the Pearson Institute for the Study and Resolution of Global Conflict, a research Institute housed within the Harris School of Public Policy at the University of Chicago.

Daniella Choi: Hello, my name is Daniella Choi.

Daniel Vallejo: And I'm Daniel Vallejo and we are so excited to have Dr. Rebecca Wolfe and Maurice Amollo with us. Rebecca is a professor at the Harris School of Public Policy and she's a renowned expert on political violence, conflict and violent extremists. Maurice is the Chief of Party for Mercy Corps Nigeria's country office. The two of them have worked together for a long-time developing programs and conducting evaluations on conflict mitigation.

Daniella Choi: On this episode, we highlight Mercy Corps program in Nigeria called the "Community Initiatives to Promote Peace. It's a multi-faceted program aimed at building bridges between pastoralists and farmers by engaging community and faith-based leaders, coordinating social assistance, and strengthening conflict mitigation networks to promote peaceful coexistence. We talk about the intergroup tension between the indigenous and non-indigenous populations as a root of conflict and how this identity-based conflict is widespread around the world. We also discussed the disruptive effects of COVID-19 and social distancing measures on implementing this program, which is based on building trust and social cohesion.

Daniel Vallejo: Dr. Wolfe and Maurice, thank you for joining us today. We understand you're focusing on mainly two groups, addressing the conflict between two groups, so if you could talk a little bit more about these two groups, the difference between them, or why this conflict arose.

Maurice Amollo: The Community Initiatives to Promote Peace program is trying to empower communities to prevent and respond to violence and violent extremism by strengthening key skills and relationships. We are trying to also foster an environment for peace through policy, advocacy, media outreach, and of course, linkages

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to development programs. The focus there is mostly to ensure that the various development programs and policies that are being implemented to improve people's lives in the middle belt are conflict sensitive. They're being implemented based on do no harm principles. But now for our study, the focus is on two groups, the farmers and the herders, and that conflict has had a long history and it's complicated because of a myriad of issues and challenges that have come with it.

One of the things that is happening currently, particularly in what we call the Chad Basin is because of the effects of climate change. We are having an accelerated state of desertification. And with that, we have communities that are moving from as far as Chad southwards, and mostly herders from the Fulani community. And as they move, they are getting into conflicts with farmers because of the competition for the limited natural resources, most of the cases, the herders are accused of leaving the animals unattended and destroying farms. And so, because of that, it has brought really serious, violent conflicts between those two groups, but it is also complicated by the religious dynamics, because the Fulani are predominantly Muslim, and the majority of farmers in this middle belt are Christians, and religion is the strongest form of identity in Nigeria. This violence has become political, politicians use it to access resources, but also power, it has become religious. The underlying root causes are not in most cases appropriately addressed. There are also serious individuals who can appropriately respond to some of these disagreements on the margin and use nonviolent ways to deal with those particular conflicts. Our other partners are trying to build the capacity of these particular communities, but also foster an environment where these individuals can be able to resolve their conflicts in a non-violent manner.

Daniel Vallejo: An important root of this conflict is conflict with the natural resources and their scarcity. Is this scarcity due to human intervention, or is it more related to a natural cycle in order to understand what are the possible solutions on the scope?

Maurice Amollo: I would think it's both. One is that there are challenges with demographics. You know, the Nigerian population is very young, and it is expanding so fast to the country right now. The population of the countries in Europe are between 200 to 250 million people, and of that, I think over 70% is below 35 years. There are no jobs, there are no jobs. There are challenges with the governance system. Security is a big challenge. The government is unable to provide adequate security to these people, and there is not enough space where communities can co-create with the government officials to come up with solutions that are challenging them. And because of that, everybody is to himself or herself. But also, I think that the limitation is, these communities are heavily dependent on natural resources, particularly the herders, and if it is farmers, mostly depending on rain-fed agriculture, there is not enough space for everyone, and there is not enough capacity to rally the communities around common areas where they can be able to deal with some of these problems because of, again, as I said, weaknesses within the governance system.

Daniella Choi: In terms of what we're seeing in the scarcity mindset, it can go for the natural resources, and obviously the effects of climate change is making livelihood for subsistence farmers extremely difficult. And alongside of that, the scarcity mindset that it exists within the ingroup and outgroup population. So, sort of the social trust element and the social network element. And we're curious, particularly because the intervention you're designing, or you have designed and are evaluating, is a peace-building intervention that is really founded on building that social understanding and trust. So, how that selection process happened and deciding which dimension of this root causes to focus on.

Rebecca Wolfe: These peace-building interventions Mercy Corps has been working on actually started probably in about, I think, 2009, with a program funded by the UK government. And we've been able to do these follow on interventions, building off of that and the intersectionality of the farmers and herders and religion, and the

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religious dynamic that plays a role, but it worked with communities. They say particularly in the more rural areas, it's largely about the resources. What's been an added identity issue that's come up in recent years, is this question of local versus foreign, outside pastoralists, or Fulani, as Maurice is saying, because of climate change, people are migrating from further North down South. And so, they aren't familiar with the agreements that had been fostered with local Fulani. With Mercy Corps, they did a qualitative study of this kind of foreign pastoralist, and at one point, a discussion with USH, should we talk about it in terms of farmer-pastoralists conflict, or in a sense, local versus – I forget the term they were thinking of using, because local farmers and pastoralists weren't having that many issues with each other.

It was about this additional identity that came apart of it. And so, what we were seeing back then, in 2000, this was clearly the most important kind of issue and that was affecting this area of Nigeria more. So, we were doing assessments in the south of Nigeria as well, but this is where we also felt we could have the most impact because it was a locally based conflict, not driven by more political factors at a national level. What's been interesting is a lot of the funding for peacebuilding around 2012 and 2014 started to move to Northeastern Nigeria because of Boko Haram, and so, a different identity-based conflict. And all the good work that had happened in the middle belt, all the funding went towards the Northeast and now violence because of these resource factors has escalated again.

And so, the money's now moving back, and it shows the fact of having a short-term mindset on these issues, because they're identity-based and longstanding, has potentially perverse effects.

Daniella Choi: I lived in Gambia, and last summer, I worked in Ghana, and because my host family were Fulani people from Guinea, I always try to talk to folks if I see them. And it's really interesting because the conflict in Gambia was Fulani pastoralists from Niger. And the people always said, "Oh, they're from Niger, they're very different from us." Whereas in Ghana too, I was in the Northern side and there were Fulani folks from Burkina Faso that came over with political hardships, like years ago or something like that. And people still have a very strong identity of, "Oh, they're the Fulanis from Burkina Faso, which was really fascinating how long that lasts."

Daniel Vallejo: I was wondering, I was thinking, when you start working with nomadic communities, you have to change a lot, this scope of how you measure the impact or how you continue measuring the impact, because they will change, they will move. I mean, in your report, you make a lot of analysis like in this municipality this happened, or in this one, this happened, how do you do this? They will not be there tomorrow.

Rebecca Wolfe: I will say, I often joke how I didn't learn my lesson last time around, of doing a RC with a mobile population. I had done a research workshop with people when I was designing the first study and no one gave me feedback that this was a really bad idea. And it really, in some ways is a bad idea. And yet I'm doing it again. I mean, one thing that has worked really well, and has helped us is our local partner. They parry, in both the previous study and this study that we're currently running, they really understand where the pastoralist communities are moving. And again, local pastoralists, there's regular movements that they make yearly. And so, we could know where to follow up with them. It did make other aspects of the peacebuilding program difficult. So, how do you have a project that benefits the pastoralists to the same extent as the farmers? Cause you're putting it in a physical...

Daniel Vallejo: So, when you're – talking specifically about pastorals – you've put in this community, in this geographic location, the numbers you find, that group is going to become part of another municipality?

Rebecca Wolfe: Because of the way the movements are, they still are kind of grouped within a community. So, even if they move far away, we were able to kind of separate it out. So, it's not the way we demarcate community, so that there wouldn't be that contamination that it sounds like you're getting at that. So, they moved from a

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treatment community, for example, to a control community in their migration. Is that what, in essence, what you're asking?

Daniel Vallejo: Exactly, yeah, perfect.

Rebecca Wolfe: So, we were able to make sure, again, working with the local partner, they would help us be able to map who the communities are, where the pastoralists went to, so that we didn't have kind of those strict boundaries between those. I will say there were times in the previous study where, to be able to address some of the conflict dynamics. We had controlled communities come into the study because we wouldn't be able to resolve the conflict dynamics without them. And that was more of a priority than the study. What we also realized, that by including control communities from time to time, it would minimize any results we had. It wouldn't have exacerbated the results. And so, we still could feel confident.

Daniel Vallejo: Part of what we have done, I think as Rebecca mentioned, is to try and understand the movement patterns of the pastoral. It's so hard. We also take a very close look at the seasons. You know, the rainy seasons and the dry seasons are to determine how those movements will be influenced. We also have mapped out the corridors, even though those keep changing, we've mapped out the corridors to try and predict where they'll come from and how they move, what community they will come to. And in most cases over the years, that pattern has been fairly similar. It hasn't changed much, and that is why you have conflicts recurring in certain areas over and over again. That said, it's of course a challenge that we continuously have to take into consideration. We are trying to see if we can work with RN because they are doing this human tracking, where they can predict when the pastoralists or the herders will likely move from one area to another.

Daniella Choi: It seems that building trust and getting buy-in from both sides of the peacebuilding that you're working on is really important. And particularly with creating the intervention design or even understanding who are the leaders and what are the government resources that they would like to be linked to, and mitigation techniques, it seems like there's a lot that requires centering the communities' voice and centering their experience, as well as co-creating the intervention. I was wondering if you could provide one example to how a better understanding of the needs of their community has allowed for this space to co-create their intervention.

Maurice Amollo: One of the things we've done, of course, it's really critical to understand really the inner dynamics and operations of the community you're working with, to know who is, who, who are the influencers, who are the gate keepers, who do I want to keep close? Who do I want to keep even closer? Particularly the spoilers. We try to keep them as close as possible. And I think we do all that so continuously, we have a very important component in our programming, and that is conflict and stakeholder analysis or mapping where, before we start programming, we try to map as exhaustively as possible, who are the key actors in each community, who has the ability to move people away from, but also to violence. And once we know who these individuals are, then we develop strategies on how to reach out to them.

So, they are part and parcel of the problem. Conflict analysis enables us to understand the dynamics of the conflict factors and how they are changing at any one given time, as you know, conflicts can evolve very fast. It can start into something about your animals ate my corn, and then it moves very, very fast for a very different thing. If you ask why people are fighting, it would have changed, it would have acquired a very different image. So, continuously we do conflict analysis, but we are also conducting interviews, what we call daily context analysis, where we send questions to communities and they are able to respond. And we are able to see real-time in our dashboard, what, how people perceive the state of peace or conflicts in their particular community. And to be able to then come up with an appropriate response to what that is. It all revolves around trust

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building with all the key strategic quarters. And that includes government, it includes security officers, politicians, youth, women, who are a very, very important component of this program, and bringing all of them together, or what I think Rebecca normally says, creating a dense network of individuals who can be able to create where there is attention, but also respond with a necessary capacity to respond to that particular incident.

Root of Conflict Introducers: We will be right back. Hey, Root of Conflict listeners. This is David Ruban from UC3P, the main page. Obviously, if you're listening to this, you like Root of Conflict. We think there might be a good chance you'll like the main page too. Every Friday, podcasters from across UC3P do interviews and mini-series on a wide range of topics related to policy, politics, and current affairs. Check out UC3P, the main page, wherever you find podcasts. And now back to Root of Conflict.

Daniel Vallejo: We're going to move a little bit to another topic. Like we understand that COVID has become this global thing, this global pandemic, but when you start thinking about rural communities that are not so related to this global interexchange, we were wondering if COVID is really that important in these situations. Like for example, I'm from Colombia and comparing to the Colombian situation, in many rural regions, you have issues with malaria, with dengue, COVID is just like another one, it's not the one. So, if you could talk a little bit more about this, how are they leaving this there.

Maurice Amollo: Just like you said in Colombia, it's almost the same here, that people think that yes, the government is telling us there is COVID-19 there, but the systems that the government has put in place to respond to the pandemic are in many ways in direct conflict with people's normal, daily ways of life. And it's even worse in these communities where we, if you are in urban or peri-urban areas, they depend on wage and employment. And so, to tell them to restrict movements, social distancing, to tell people that you have to continuously wash your hands in communities that are suffering serious water scarcity, it just makes sense. And then bring that together with the whole trust issue. These are communities in conflict, in standing conflicts here, there are serious challenges with the trust, because of flows and governance, communities don't trust what the government says. And of course, then we also have the other component, the elephant in the room in Nigeria, and that's Boko Haram with its propaganda. Whether this is something that is affecting the West, the enemy, or that has been brought by the enemy and we should resist, or this is just another strategy to put us down.

So, it has come with a lot of misinformation. Unfortunately, the government's approach has not really responded to some of these challenges because I see daily briefings of the state of COVID-19 and they're just called statistics. You know, now this number of people are infected in the last 24 hours. There are now so many 10,000 people infected. This number is dead. This number are discharged today. But they do not really explain to a random guy in the street language, what all this means. So, in a way, people have just ignored these guidelines and they are going on with their life. However, in response, the government has instructed security operators to take various stern action. Again, it's people who are not following those guidelines.

The military has been deployed. And with that, we have had an escalation of conflict particularly between youth and the police, because a lot of security have now been deployed to either enforce the curfew or enforce travel restrictions. individuals have taken advantage of standing conflicts, especially between the farmers and herders to commit things that we'll say are purely criminal, either cattle-wrestling, stealing from farmers or from herders. And this has seen a spike in violence between farmers and herders, since the COVID-19 started, with not much response from the government. Again, interestingly, even government officials are uncomfortable to move around because of COVID-19. And so, the response is not as robust as you'd think it. And then the other thing is that even those people that we had trained in conflict with the issue are unable actually to move in and deal with this, some of these conflicts.

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And so, we are worried that COVID-19 is likely to wipe out some of the gains that we had achieved. We have tried to really adjust to the situation. We've moved a number of our programs to radio. We have expanded our social media outreach, particularly targeting young people. And we are remaining in contact with the key strategic community leaders, through telephone conversations to ensure that where we can intervene, we are intervening. The restriction in movement particularly, and social distancing has created a very new dynamic that I think as a peacebuilding community, we are not very prepared for. Our work is first and foremost to build relationships and you don't build relationships through telephone conversations. You build or rebuild relationships through bringing people together, sitting and confronting some of the challenges and the trust issues that they are going through. So yeah, we are using alternative means and we are right now in uncharted waters. but I'm sure something good will come out of this.

Daniella Choi: Maurice, as you were talking about how coronavirus has affected Nigeria and your particular work, it really mirrors the U.S.'s experiences, as it does for a lot of other places in terms of misinformation and sort of delayed or inaction on the part of the government, and just the daily lives as we know it being affected. And I wonder particularly in the context of the issue that you're working in, the spike in violence with the pastoralists and farmers community, and growing distrust, that the social distancing is obviously not aiding. In an ideal world, what would be an intervention you would like to see from the government?

Maurice Amollo: So, we have started organizing online meetings, virtual meetings with some strategic government officers, but also members from the civil society to begin to discuss some of these policies that the government have put in place. And we just remind them about the unintended outcome of some of those. For example, things around banning travel and what they define as essential services. And they have not seen, particularly among conflicted communities, that individuals who have the capacity to mediate this conflict should be considered as essential servants. So we are trying to really advocate for these individuals to be allowed, of course, taking care of all other things that you need to take care of during a pandemic, and they're allowed to make sure that they mediate this conflict to avoid escalation, so that they're not arrested, because we are stopping the spread of COVID-19, but people are losing lives and property. So, it doesn't make a lot of sense. So, how can we still implement these policies, but also ensure that conflicts are not worsening where they are? How do we balance between the two?

Daniel Vallejo: Given that the governments have been spending a lot of resources to overcome this COVID crisis, do you think this will affect in some sense, the available funds for international aid?

Rebecca Wolfe: Yes. And I think maybe Maurice can also add to that in terms of, has he been asked, or knows of how the Nigeria program has been asked to move interventions into a different area. Earlier in the conversation, I mentioned that just moving from the middle belt to Northeast Nigeria because of the change in crisis. And I saw that happen in Iraq as well after ISIS. So, we had been doing all this governance and civil society work in other areas and ISIS hid, and all the money and the work moved to humanitarian, not the development work and peace-building work that had been happening. And so, I think there is going to be a lot of shifting of funding into this area. And one of the things I've seen from other research I did in Afghanistan is in a sense what a potential backlash affects when aid goes away, especially when it's done, not in a considered and deliberate way, when it's just this kind of immediate thing. And so, there is, particularly in conflict zones, that significantly risk that not just all the gains will be lost, but actually could create more grievances.

Maurice: Currently. I think what is happening in Nigeria, we've seen some donors, some of the programs to begin to repurpose some of the funding. So far, I think the sector that has been affected is the USAID, humanitarian response programs. At least for me, I've had several calls with our donor USAID, but also with

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DFID and our message has been very, very clear and simple. I think just based on what Rebecca has said, we have told them that look, you have already invested heavily in dealing with some of these conflicts. If you look at the UN SDGs, particularly for a country like Nigeria, they're still in the red. They have not achieved that. There has been some progress, but they're not quite there. In fact, they are still [...].

If you look at the amount of investments that have already been put to deal with this conflict, I think for the UK government alone, if you look at the just the ODA, they invested around over 200, close to 300 million in 2018. If, right now, we decide that COVID is the fraction of the thin, unless we propose funding and put a break on conflicts, I think the effect will be really, really bad, because number one, these conflicts have not stopped. As I said earlier, they are continuing, even as COVID-19, is ongoing and we will most likely lose everything we've worked for in in the past few years. So, I would say COVID-19 as a threat multiplier, and let's double down in our efforts and say, "Yes, we will deal with this COVID-19, but we will also ensure that other efforts at managing conflicts are maintained." Because diseases really do well in areas where there is silence, where people are not talking, and conflicts breed silence, because of trust issues. If you want people to tackle COVID-19 effectively, you will want effective communication. You want people to cooperate. You want people to come together. Conflict does not allow for the building of social capital, for those people to come together and do these things. So, if you take your foot off the gas now, it will be worse.

Daniella Choi: We are in the U.S., we are in the middle of another crisis with race relations and systemic racism, and just ongoing protests with everything that's been going on with police violence. And I could not help but think about the parallel of the conversation we're having here, with the dynamic that we're seeing in the U.S., and I wonder if you have been reflecting on that dynamic based on what you know of the mitigation work you've done in other places, and how you're repping around this issue.

Rebecca Wolfe: As I reflected in class, on Monday, we started the humanitarian course with the uptick of COVID in that there was an essence, a humanitarian response in this country. And we closed class on Monday after a night of pretty bad looting that distracted from the important protests that were happening.

And I had walked around my neighborhood that morning and just saw all the damage that had been done. And it was an interesting kind of book casing of the course. And there has been talk of UN resolutions against the U.S. What would humanitarian intervention mean here, or if that UN resolution got passed, I mean, it won't, at least at the Security Council. So, definitely at that high level I had been thinking about it. What I've been thinking actually at the intersection of COVID and this issue is just a complete lack of trust with communities and government and how what's happening now is even going to make that worse. And so, we likely will have another spike of COVID, and how much harder it will be to have those social distancing measures taken up. And so, seeing in my neighborhood how people are not all obeying the rules already, and we're one day out of lockdown. And so, that to me, is just the lack of trust in institutions here now. And so, much of the peace building work I've done with Maurice over the years has been about trying to connect communities to institutions.

Danielle Choi: Absolutely. We need interventions in the U.S. very badly as well. So, thank you for that.

Maurice Amollo: Yeah. And I mean, just to add, we've had similar challenges in my country back in Kenya. I've seen similar challenges in other countries as well and in Nigeria currently. And I think apart from building those strong institutional networks and connections and relationships that Rebecca has talked about, one thing that we continuously challenge people to think about, but which for some strange reason everybody's afraid of - and I mean we can also see it in the US now, is getting familiar with what our emotions teach us when we go through some of these challenges. When we hurt one another. Because when we don't feel acknowledged, or

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when grief goes underground and gets twisted, when we don't have avenues for response, whether it's embodied or not, but some kind of avenue for response, or when we think that it's for other people, over there, then things get strange and harmful.

And I think that particularly as humanity, we are not even very practiced at perceiving it as harm. It reminds me of those people who are commenting with such compassion for the dog in the video of Andy Cooper, if you've seen that. It's some kind of twisted shame and empathy. We continuously lose our capacity to respond to such things. It happens continuously and our response is not authentic. Yeah. And it's not authentic and it's not from a place of connectedness, and we continue hurting one another. I see it right now among the Christians and Muslims in Nigeria. I see it among ethnic communities in Kenya, whether it is Luos and Kikuyus, and now I see it in this situation in the U.S. It's some kind of twisted sham that cuts off connection. So, you don't have to perceive it as such, but it's actually a [...]. So, we need to really be able to be familiar with our emotions and confront them across lines. You should not be ashamed of talking about some of these things.

Daniel Vallejo: Briefly tell us, what are the next steps? How is this probably going to follow? Do you have already defined what's going to happen?

Maurice Amollo: Oh, so we already have the money. We have the funds –

Daniel Vallejo: Haha, great.

Maurice Amollo: We have the funds to conduct the study, and we have already started with the study. I think we've already trained a group of community mediators and deployed them. On some of them, I think in one state, while we managed to collect initial data, they've already, I think, resolved 125 disputes. We already have communities' control and test the communities in place. So, the study is ongoing. I think going forward right now is to see to conduct a midterm test, to see where we are with things. We are actually interviewing community leaders in control areas so that we get to know also what their capacity levels is and how they see things, which will enable effective comparison. Then we'll do a midterm evaluation, and at the end of the year, we will now start adding more activities to what we are doing right now and to keep testing and see eventually what we get.

Rebecca Wolfe: We're in about the first year of a five-year program, now. And often you get results of studies like this after the program is over. And because we're doing it at the early part of the program, we'll be able to feed in the results of the study to be able to adapt it and learn from that. And then, as Maurice said, we're adding different components to be able to also look at the differential effects of these various components. One of the challenges of many development and peacebuilding programs today is that it has multiple components. And so, you don't know what's having the most impact on your results. And so, after the first year of implementation, we'll add in those dialogues, so kind of the more contact part of the program, and see what the added effect is, of the relationship building component in addition to mediation. And so, those results would come say two years out, but it's nice to be able to do it as a more iterative process, versus just, you run a five-year study, and then about a year after the study, the program is over and then you find out what it did. And no one who was involved in the program is around anymore. So, it's very much more of a learning approach we've been able to take here.

Daniel Vallejo: Thank you very much.

Daniella Choi: This was a lovely chat. Thank you so much.

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Root of Conflict Introducers: Thank you for listening to this episode of Root of Conflict, featuring Maurice Amollo and Rebecca Wolfe. Thanks to our interviewers, Daniella Choi and Danielle Vallejo and to UC3P and the Pearson Institute for their continued support of this series. To learn more about the Pearson Institute's research and events, visit the PearsonInstitute.org and follow them on Twitter.